

Grass



Cover:

Straw Horse, Japan

Made from *sasame* straw, this figure placed on the roof would scare away evil spirits.

Mingei International

Opposite Page:

Corn Dolly, Mexico

Known in Mexico as *Corazón de Trigo*, a corn dolly there is made exactly as are those of Europe and North Africa, and it is very likely that the tradition was brought to Mexico by the Spanish.

Photograph: Marian and Ken Harvey from *Crafts of Mexico*

Exhibition Dates:

The Institute for the Arts,
Rice University, Houston, Texas
1-25-77—3-13-77

The Museum of Contemporary Crafts
of the American Crafts Council, New York
4-5-77—6-19-77

The Renwick Gallery of the National Collection
of Fine Arts, Smithsonian Institution,
Washington, D C.
8-5-77—2-20-78

Grass

Mary Hunt Kahlenberg

Los Angeles County Museum of Art
October 14, 1976–January 2, 1977



Donors and Lenders

ISBN 0-87587-075-9

Published by the
Los Angeles County Museum of Art
5905 Wilshire Boulevard
Los Angeles, California 90036

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Los Angeles County Museum of Art

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Printed in the U.S.A.

Designed in Los Angeles
by Evelyn Hirsch.

All text set in 9 pt. Helvetica
by Typographic Service Company,
Los Angeles

The catalog is printed
by Printers Inc., Los Angeles

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The Hubert C. Armstrong Collection,
LaVerne, California

Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, British Columbia
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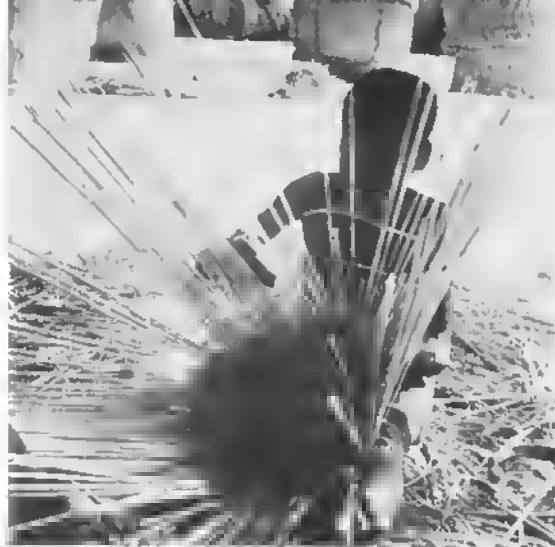
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Basket Maker, Upper Volta

Cane baskets are made by the Mossi Tribe in the vicinity of Ouagadougou. The ends of the basket are held between the toes to support the basket while it is being worked. Note the grass structures in the background.

Photograph: Folklorica Imports, Inc., New York

Acknowledgments

Beginning research for this exhibition was overwhelming. Not only are there ten thousand species of grass that cover almost one quarter of the earth's surface, but the definition itself of grass is disputed. For clarity and simplicity we decided to follow Miriam Webster:

In the widest sense, green herbage affording food for cattle or other grazing animals, especially that of plants belonging to the families Poaceae (true grasses), cyperaceae (sedges), and Juncaceae (rushes) in which the leaves have narrow and spear-shaped blades.

The next problem was how to identify grass once it had been made into an object. In some cases, the hollow center and nodes provided immediate identification, but in others these parts were completely hidden. Here we were assisted by Dr. C. R. Arthur Schroeder of U C L A and Dr. Lawrence Dawson of the Lowie Museum at Berkeley. In the still possible event that some palm, rattan, or other "non-grass" may have slipped in, we would be most grateful for any corrections.

Most of our sources—books on crafts, architecture, folklore, and anthropology—gave few clues to the materials of the baskets, mats, or other objects in question. Some sources cited grass when an item was clearly palm; most avoided the issue entirely with "made of fibers," accurate but useless in this instance.

Essential to the preparation of this exhibition was a research group that met every Friday for the past year. As the head of this group Dorothy Laupa worked endlessly, searching in many libraries, finding useful local sources of information, and, most importantly, helping us to identify both grasses and grass objects. My sincerest thanks to her and to the other researchers: Natalie DuBow, Vickie Elson, Lauren Hechl, Dori Lehner, Susan Schwartz,

Janel Waddill, James Watterson, Susan Wilmot, and Lori Zimmerman.

A notice in bold type in *Craft Horizons*, "Got Any Grass?" brought numerous letters to my desk, and many individuals helped locate and provide both material and information. In particular, I want to thank Applewood Seed Company, Lakewood, Colorado; Joan Bacharach; Herbert R. Cole; Patricia Dandignac, Managing Editor, *Craft Horizons*; Annette Del Zoppo; Lloyd E. Herman, Director, Renwick Gallery; International Flavors and Fragrances, Inc.; Ayako Ito, Vice Consul, Japanese Consulate; Doris E. Johnson, Kazuko Koike, Tokyo; Dr. Peter Lee, Curator of Anthropology, Los Angeles County Natural History Museum; Gary Maricich; Anne Spillman; Paul Smith, Director, Museum of Contemporary Crafts; and members of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art staff: Jeanne D'Andrea, Nola Ewing, Nancy Grubb, Evelyn Hirsch, Florence Karant, Kristen McCormick, Pat Nauert, and a very special thanks to my secretary, Janice McGruder, for all her indispensable skills and qualities.

Special gratitude goes to Marc Treib who has continuously sent me "grass notices" over the past year and has given his time and considerable skill in assisting in the design of the installation.

Finally, no aspect of this project would have been possible had the exhibition not been given a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. Elena Canavier has my special thanks for her guidance.

Grass

Haystack, Finland

This roof is only a thick layer of straw held in place by a wooden scaffold, but it is sufficient protection for the hay stacked beneath.

Photograph: Mary Hunt Kahlenberg



With the ever more rapid disappearance of craft traditions, objects made of grass provide a valuable if fragile link with centuries of anonymous craftsmen. When early man began to cultivate grasses, he also began to develop myths and rituals for their protection and renewal. Mediating deities, such as the corn goddess worshipped by farmers of the Nile Valley about 7000 B.C., later gave way to the more local corn maidens or corn mothers. In Japan, rice farmers believed in a "spirit of the paddy"; after the harvest rites farmers braided a heavy straw rope or *Shimenawa*, a Shinto symbol of purification that was hung over the doorway at the New Year's holiday to honor the rice gods. Elsewhere, at harvest's end the last few sheaves containing the "spirit of the field" were carefully preserved for spring planting. In Europe and much of the Arab world these last sheaves were traditionally woven or plaited into corn dollies; today they are woven into spirals, wreaths, stems, and crosses whose origins are in more figurative forms symbolizing the mother goddess or spirit of fertility.

Almost one quarter of the earth's plants are grasses; amazingly resilient, they survive at the climatic limits of vegetation in polar regions and mountain ranges, and cover vast stretches of the world's plains and marshlands. While modern production methods garner only the edible flowering portion of ear and discard the stems, the stems of grasses have for centuries been fashioned into objects. Techniques for making these objects are closely related to local vegetation. Analogous methods are found in places where plant life is similar, even in areas far apart and without contact. As materials determine the construction of objects, so the construction influences their shape, e.g., coiled forms from widely separated areas share similar shapes, differing only in details of decoration. Early in history it was discovered that coiling

increased the strength of grass objects. Well known in basketry, this method has also been used for centuries in boatbuilding—by the Egyptians, the Pomo Indians of California, and the Bolivian Indians of Lake Titicaca. Turkish buildings of the Ma'dan tribe look like huge upside-down coiled baskets.

An enormous array of objects has been made from grasses; from bridges and boats to clothing, mats, utensils, and tiny toys. The earliest of these objects were very simple. A hollow reed or bamboo pole sharpened at one end became a spear for hunting or fishing, carved with the images of a spirit to guide it to its prey. Bamboo was shaped into spoons or split at the ends to make whisks and strainers; lighter grasses bound together made brooms and fans. Throughout history, light, flexible objects to wear or carry have been made by splitting and then braiding grasses. A Theban tomb painting from the second millennium B.C. shows a figure wearing a straw hat resembling those worn by English harvesters represented in a medieval manuscript. The continuing vogue in Europe and America for fashionable straw hats began in sixteenth-century Italy.

Methods of making grass objects have been extremely varied: cutting, carving, twining, plaiting, binding, coiling, weaving. Coiling produces not only buildings and boats, but cone-shaped beehives and thick straw snowshoes; thinner grass, sometimes split and bound tightly with grasses of other colors, produces more delicate basket patterns. Many grass objects are made by traditional weaving methods, and the weaving of grasses may have preceded the spinning of fibers to make cloth. Japanese tatami mats are a simple over-and-under weave of *ji* straw; elsewhere rhythmic patterns or geometric designs are woven into mats by manipulating the grass nodes or by varying the color of both natural and

dyed grasses. Bamboo, because of its resilience and strength, can be worked by many methods and in any scale. In Japan carpenters' brushes are made by shredding and shaping one end of a bamboo section; the *sho* is a small, finely tuned mouth organ of bamboo; also constructed from this versatile material are buildings, tall scaffolding, bridges, rattles, elaborate fencing, and countless types of furniture.

The objects in this exhibition represent many cultures and serve a wide variety of purposes. All have been selected for their aesthetic qualities. A twelfth-century basket from Peru is included, but most of the objects were new when they were collected during the last 150 years. Precise dating of grass objects is virtually impossible, because their forms have continued over the centuries almost unchanged. Extremely fragile, grass objects are replaced as they wear out by new objects with only slight modifications or improvements. Repetition of designs often leads to individual refinements rather than to mere standardization. Changes, often made for variation as well as for functional improvement, prevent the craft from becoming sterile. While many traditional grass objects are disappearing—boats, bridges, thatched roofs, and other architectural forms have vanished with the cultures they served—a number of forms have survived the plastic invasion simply because machines cannot work grass.



Yule Bucks, Poland, Sweden, Finland

The pre-Christian meaning of the straw yule buck or goat is now lost, but since the 1600s it has been associated with St. Nicholas, or Santa Claus.

Gift of Cepelia Corporation, New York, Hemslojdstorbundet for Sweden, and exhibition acquisition.



Straw Chandelier, Poland

Chandeliers made of brightly colored pieces of paper and short lengths of straw joined in endless variations were hung in Polish farmhouses for weddings.

Gift of Cepelia Corporation, New York

Workman's Star Corn Dolly, Kansas, U.S.A.

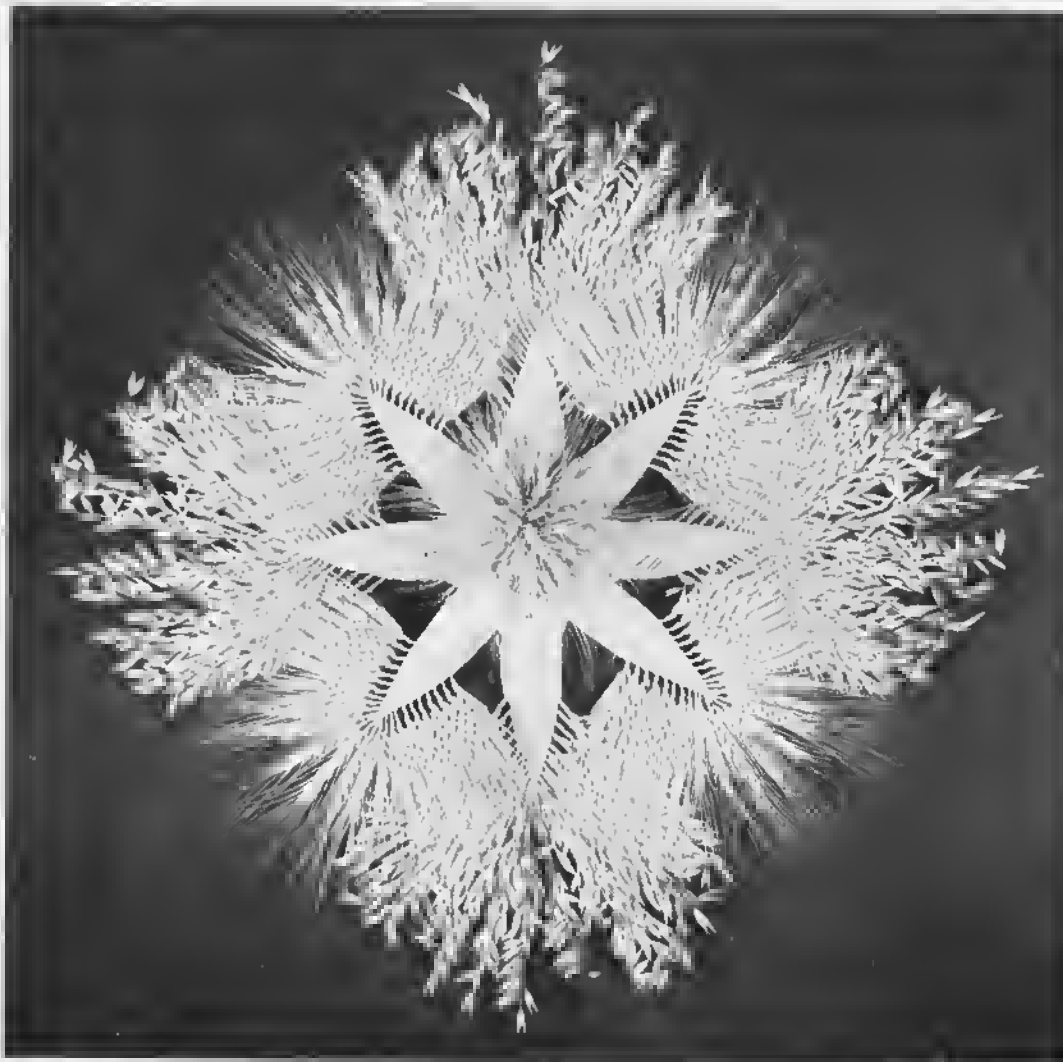
The first evening star that appeared in the sky was the traditional signal to end the day's labors. The evening star and the Welsh border corn dolly have been combined, using wheat, corn, and barley

Made for the exhibition by Doris Johnson of Luray, Kansas

St. Bridget's Cross, Aran Island, Ireland

Although the cross is named after a Christian saint, the tradition of hanging a straw cross in the barn as protection against evil began in pre-Christian times.

Minger International





Straw Flowers, Switzerland

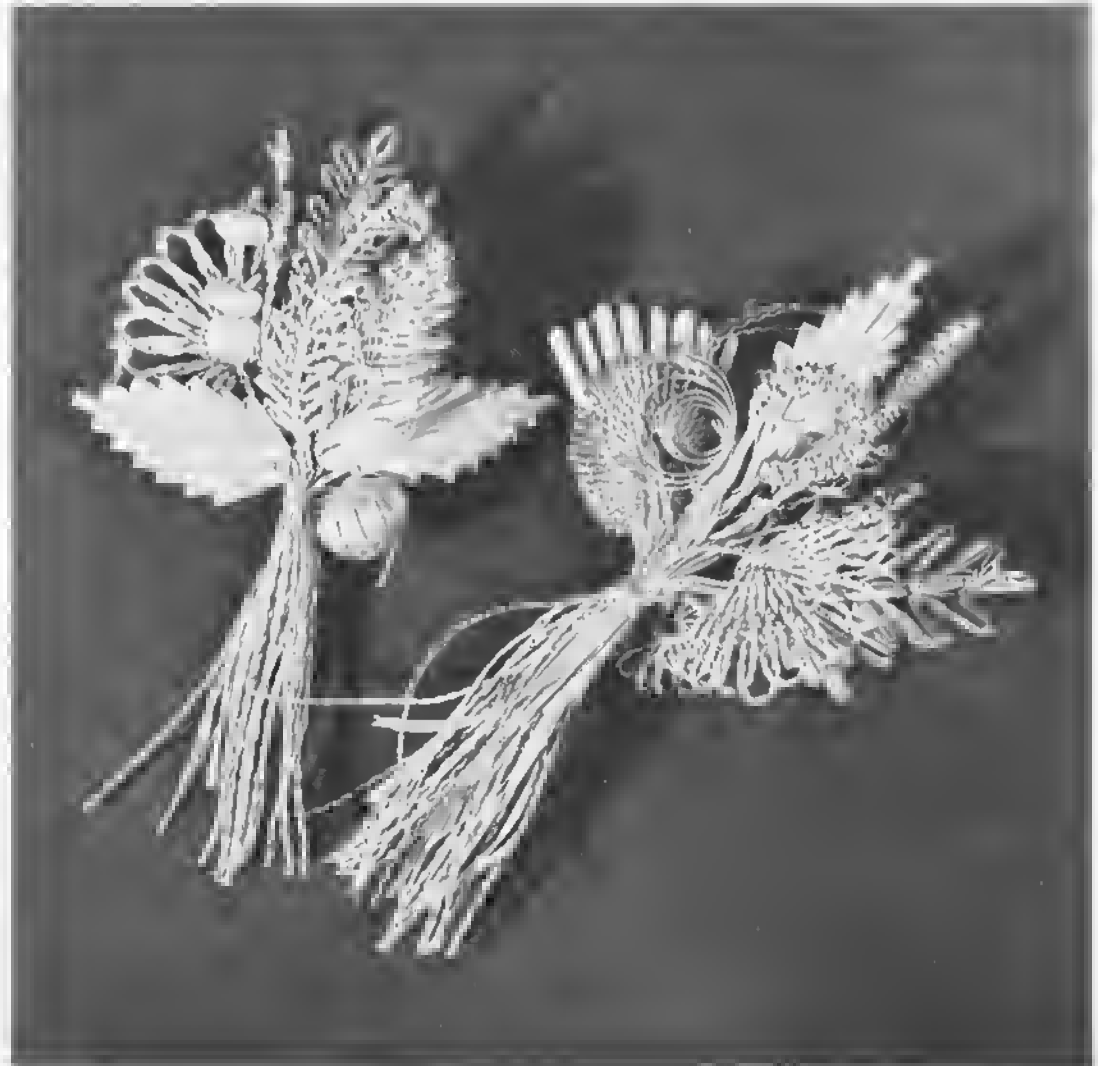
Small decorations of this type once trimmed hats. The delicacy of the design is comparable only to the inherent fragility of the material.

Acquisitions Fund

Straw Hat

Narrow straw braids are sewn together to shape the gentle wave of this hat, which must have been worn high on the head of a fashionable lady during the 1890s

Los Angeles County Museum of Art



Beehive, Europe

Beehives, or skeps, were traditionally made of straw and rush, cut prior to the harvest and bound with the year's growth of split bramble. The conical shape was always the most popular

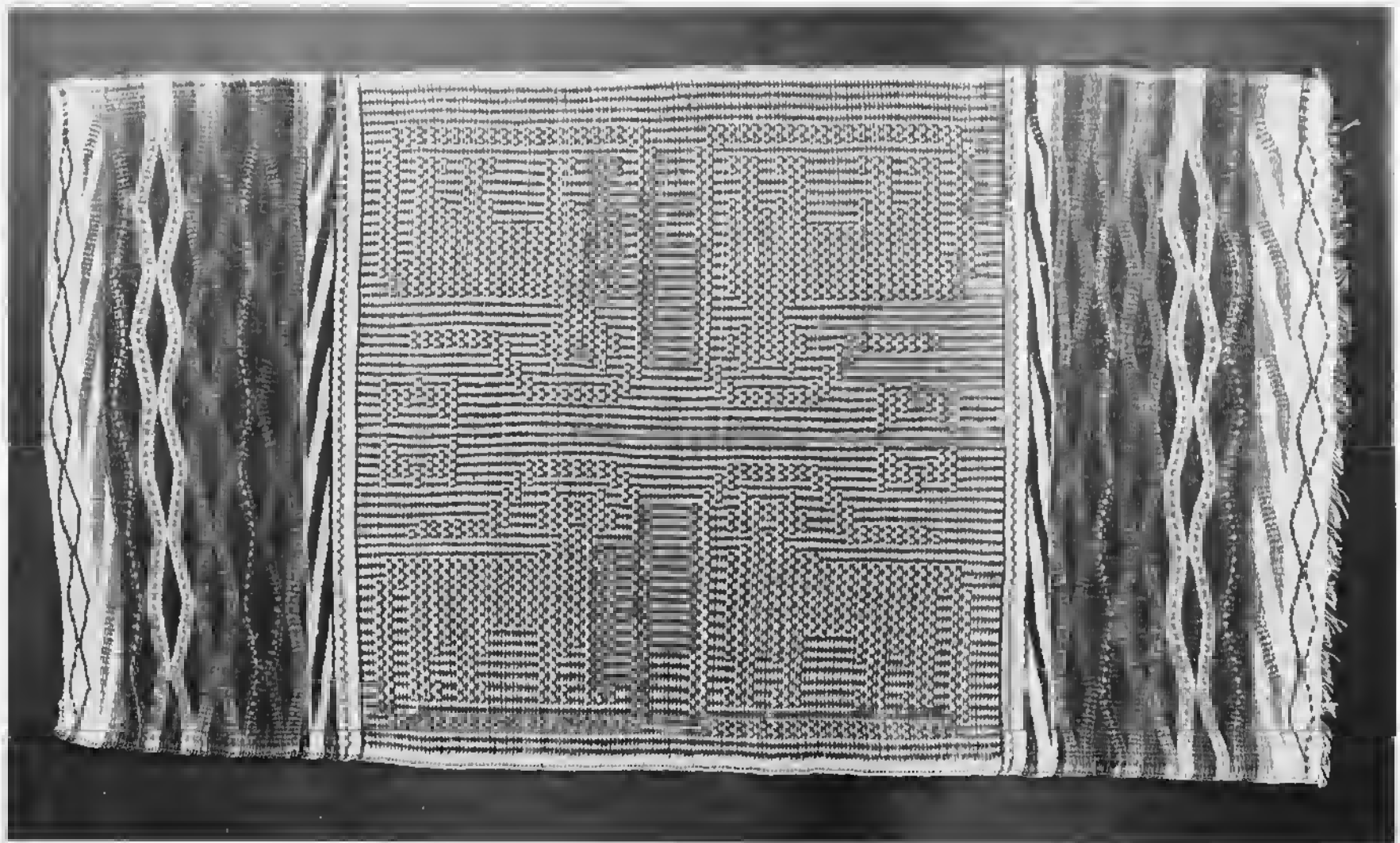
Gift of Charles Duncan



Mat, Sauk and Fox Indian Tribe, U.S.A.

Four feline images appear and disappear,
disguised in a clever technique of horizontal and
vertical stripes. Made by the Sauk and Fox Indian
Tribe of the north east.

Field Museum of Natural History



Skirt, Karok Indians, California, U.S.A.

Most so-called grass skirts are made of palm leaves, but for this one hollow grass stems are strung together with seeds and plaited at the bottom, so the skirt rustles as the wearer sways back and forth.

Southwest Museum, Los Angeles





Figure, Derbhanga, North Bihar, India

A theriomorphic figure with the head of an owl represents the goddess Lakshmi. She is made of brightly dyed sikhi grass

Vickie Elson

Mask, Iroquois, U.S.A.

Masks of this type, made by the women of the tribe, were worn by water doctors who were usually members of the Iroquois Huskface Society. The wearers became the spirits of harvest, dancing with digging sticks and hoes as part of the New Year's celebration.

Museum of Natural History, Los Angeles County



Following page, left to right:

Raincoat, Japan

Such raincoats were simply thrown over the back for protection. Made by tying bamboo leaves onto a knotted grass ground, they were only expected to last one season.

Marc Treib

Fan, Philippines

Made from grass heads twined and bound to a separate pole, this fan is both graceful and functional.

Museum of Natural History, Los Angeles County

Mask, Mexico

A sense of wildness is created by this anthropomorphic mask.

Acquisition Fund

Back Pack, Philippines

Used in an area of high humidity, this back pack has a water shed that keeps the contents dry. The halched form and wide shoulders echo the shape of the local housing.

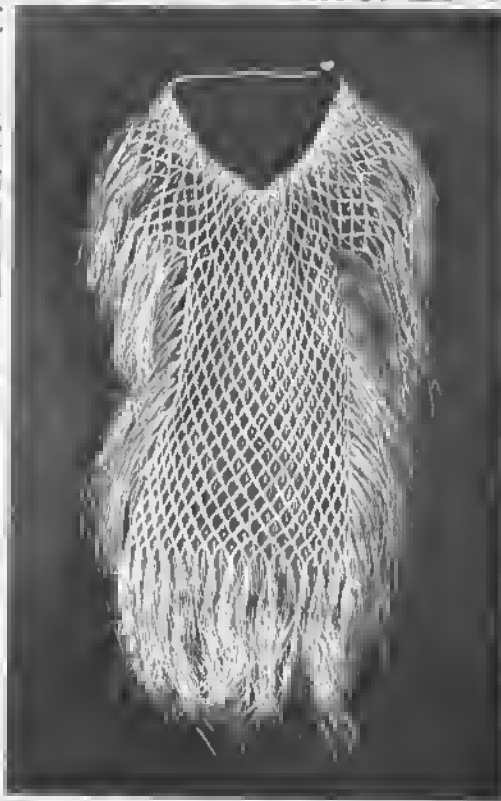
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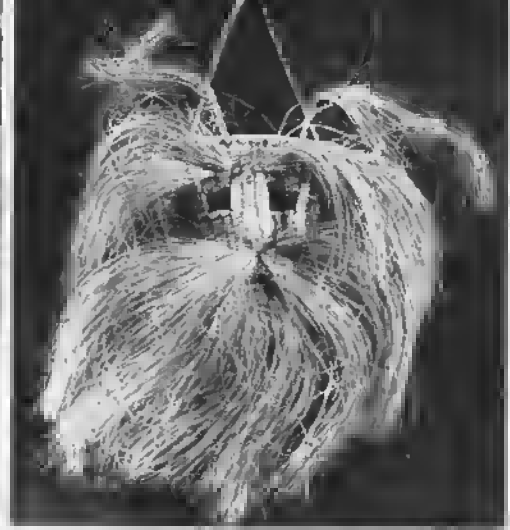
Background Photograph.

Rice Harvest, Bali, Indonesia

Offerings to the gods are placed within a cluster of rice stacks, each made from four bundles of rice. A sensitivity to forms and placement is characteristic of the Balinese ability to bring beauty to every aspect of daily life.

Photograph: Mary Hunt Kahlenberg







Corn Storehouse, State of Morelos, Mexico
Straw adobe and thatch are used to make
this beautifully rounded corn storehouse

Photograph: James Bassler

Silos, Bali, Indonesia

Grass and palm silos store the year's rice crop at a safe distance from ground animals. Their vertical orientation provides a focal point in a basically horizontal housing compound.

Photograph: Mary Hunt Kahlenberg



Chair Construction, Ajmer, Rajasthan, India

These chairs are made entirely from various parts of the grass plant. The main stalk is used to structure the base and chair back, and the rope made from the top of the grass forms the seat and binds the parts together.

Photograph: Don R. Bierlich



Thatching, England

Thatching is traditionally done in the autumn after the grain is harvested.

Photograph: Marc Treib



Thatched Roof, Denmark

The thatching on this roof is now covered with a thick growth of plants—mainly rag wort seedlings.

Photograph: Marc Treib



Christmas Decoration, Sweden

Straw decorations on the Christmas tree are a carryover from older traditions of harvest and winter ceremonies.

Gift of Hemslojdstörbundet for Sweden





Protective Wrapping, Japan

Wrapped with loosely woven rice straw, this tree in a Japanese garden assumes a striking new shape in the winter. The rice straw will protect it from the cold and the warmth it affords will attract insects out of the trunk.

Photograph: Marc Treib

Shimenawa, Japan

A symbol of purification, this rice straw rope is hung in the doorway of the Izumo Shrine and is remade every two years.

Photograph: Marc Treib



Haf, Philippines

The swirling effect of the spiral design is accentuated by the round shape of the haf. A twined and coiled inner structure forms an air pocket that keeps the wearer's head cool.

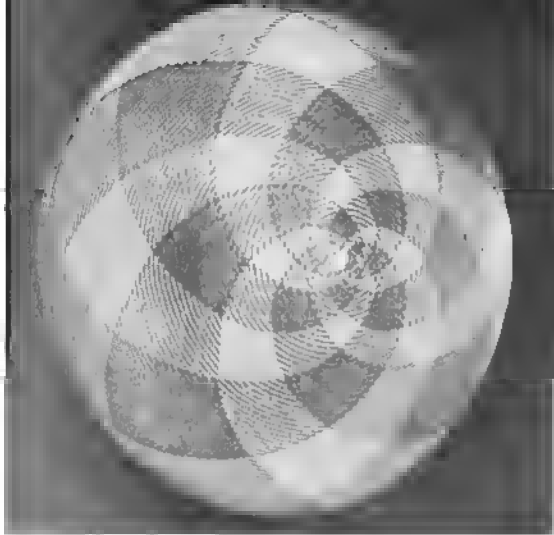
Museum of Natural History, Los Angeles County

Ceremonial Rice Planting, Japan

In Japanese legend spirits watch over each phase of the rice-growing cycle. The ceremonial planting of rice seedlings honors the spirit of water and the spirits of the paddy fields

Photograph: Marc Treib

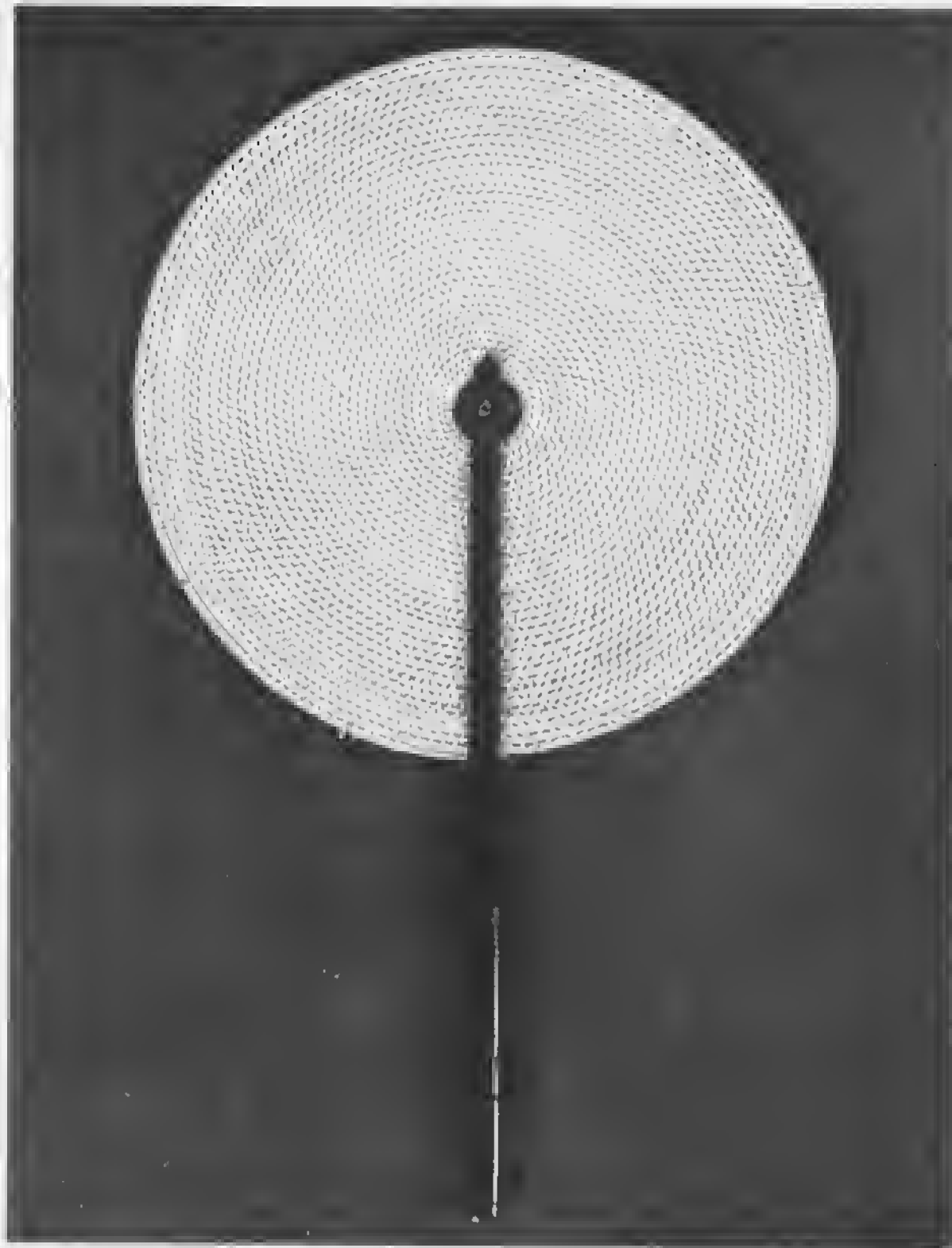




Fan, China

Elegant in its simplicity, this fan is made in the basic coil construction technique. A plain wooden handle is attached at the center.

Museum of Cultural History, University of California, Los Angeles



Basket, Japan

The refined basket tradition is continued by artist Chikuensai Azuma. Two baskets, one within the other, each a slightly distorted circle, are connected at the narrowest point. The varying widths of the individual bamboo stripes create a rhythm that turns the circles into a spiral.

Anonymous Loan





Necklace, Egypt

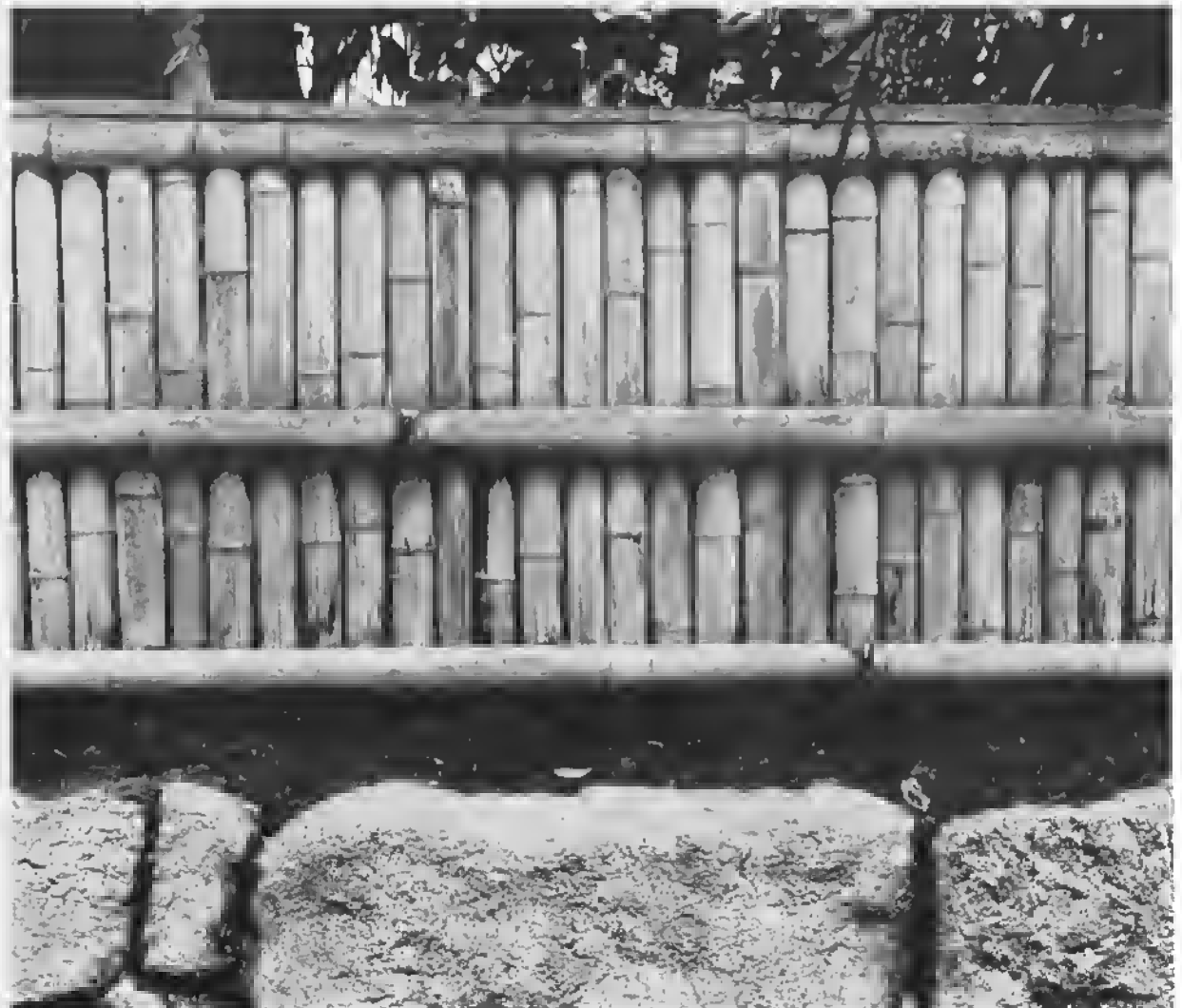
Grass wrapped around wax makes individual beads that are strung together in a form reminiscent of the gold necklaces of dynastic Egypt

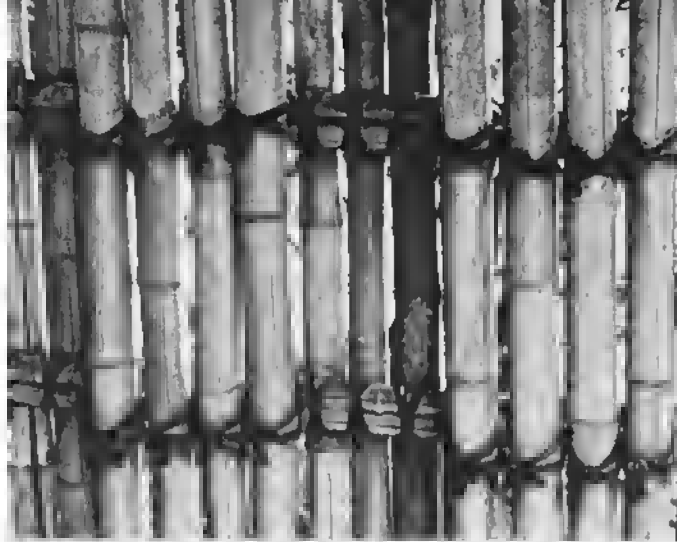
John Browse

Bamboo Fence, Japan

The rhythmic arrangement of the bamboo nodes gives beauty to a fence of the simplest construction.

Photograph: Marc Treib





Bamboo Fence, Japan

Made to be seen from both sides, groups of four bamboo poles are placed in two staggered planes, which gives the appearance of a double fence

Photograph: Marc Treib

Hishaku, Japan

Hishaku, or ladles, are placed next to the path in a Japanese garden so that visitors may enjoy the water. The ladle is made from two pieces of bamboo: a hollow section used as the receptacle and a split piece as the handle.

Photograph: Marc Treib



Wine Container, Sumatra, Indonesia

This bamboo container which has developed a particularly fine patina was made to hold a locally produced rice wine.

Museum of Cultural History, University of California, Los Angeles



Broom, Japan

Tools made from grass give the gardener a sense of continuity with the soil.

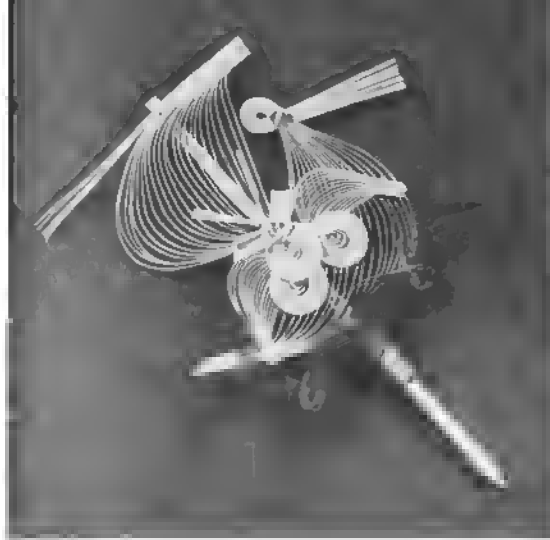
Photograph: Marc Treib

Ceremonial Bottle Stopper, Japan

Made by splitting, bending, and tying bamboo in a wide variety of ways, this small decoration is used at New Year's festivities.

Gift of Anita Brandow





Rake, Japan

Simple tools such as this rake have been made in the same manner for centuries. They are direct in construction, functional, and beautiful to look at.

Photograph Marc Treib



